

YANKS AT HINGES IN COUNTER OFFENSIVE BELOW SOISSONS

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ported by the 28th, south of the Marne to the eastward of Château-Thierry, each bore a glorious part in this slugging of the German attack, which will be mentioned in a little more detail when the service of these individual divisions in the counter-offensive is taken up.

The Counter Stroke

On July 18, when the enemy had involved practically 50 divisions—or about 25 per cent of his total forces on the Western front—in his hopeless drive in the Champagne and the eastern side of the Marne salient, Marshal Foch struck. And he struck at the place where it would hurt the enemy the most—at the western side of the Marne salient, where success would enable him to cut the communications of the German forces fighting desperately on the other side of the salient and then to crush those forces between the closing wings of his own or also oblige them to retreat on the battle beneath the raining blows of their opponents and retreat under the most difficult conditions.

Regarding the Champagne-Château-Thierry segment as isolated from the rest of the Western front, the maneuver of Marshal Foch was quite similar to a highly magnified scale, to that of Lee in the Chancellorsville campaign of 1863, when the left wing of Hooker's army, operating against Fredericksburg and its communications, was immobilized by the Confederate right at Mury's Heights and Salem Church, while the Confederate left, under Jackson, crushed the Union right west of Chancellorsville and forced Hooker to retreat from the salient he had seized south of the Rappahannock, just as the Allies forced the Germans to retreat from the salient they had seized south of the Vesle.

As it has always been conceded that the brilliance of Lee's plan of action at Chancellorsville was excelled by nothing unless it was by the plan of the American forces carried to the front with a precision and gallantry worthy of the best traditions of both services.

On July 17 the Germans were holding the nearly 50 kilometers of the western side of their salient from Château-Thierry to the River Aisne north-west of Soissons with 11 divisions, and these had none in support, unless the six reserve divisions which were intended to be used in the attack under way on the other flank, could be so considered. The Allies, on the other hand, had 12 divisions in the line on this same front, with ten more immediately behind ready to take their places in line for the assault early next morning.

Without Warning from Guns

This assault, which was not preceded by any artillery bombardment, left the stunning surprise effect of the infantry advance should thereby be diminished, went over at precisely 4:35 a.m. on the morning of July 18, and along the entire 20 kilometers from the Aisne to Château-Thierry. Along the whole line a withering artillery barrage tore up the ground in front of the infantry, and by nightfall the latter had smashed through the German trench systems to an average depth of about four kilometers, and had taken 17,000 prisoners and 250 guns. From that day on the attack, sustained with undiminished vigor, continued to make progress, gaining, sometimes greater, sometimes less distance, but always going onward. The direct result was the withering of the German initiative, once and for all.

Already by the 20th the Germans had given up the left of their attack on the Champagne front as hopeless and were withdrawing their surplus troops from there. But they were still feebly trying to exploit their slight initial success between Reims and the Marne, while they had thinned their front and were merely fighting a rear-guard battle to cover their retreat from the rest of it, while their main body of rested troops was reduced to 37 divisions, and thickening signs of offensive intentions on the part of the British and French armies further north and west were compelling them to hold back against possible need in those quarters. In short, the German offensive game was up, and they knew it.

The American Share

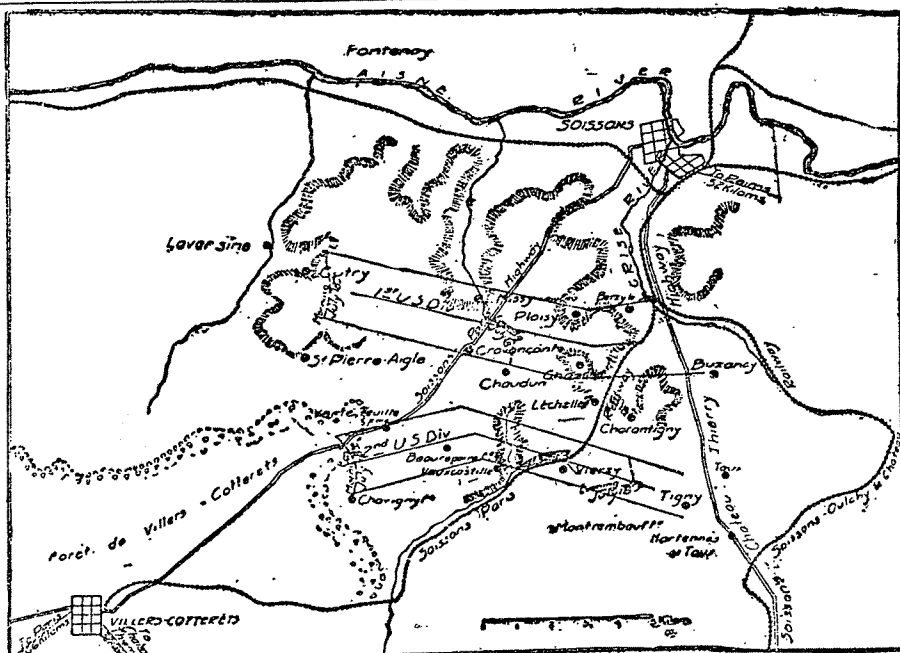
We may now trace more fully the part taken by the American divisions in achieving the magnificent results above outlined. From left to right the American divisions which participated in the stroke on the morning of July 18 were the 1st, 2nd and 26th. The 1st and 2nd were a short distance south of the Aisne and formed with the French 18th and 19th and 1st Moroccan Divisions, the 20th French Corps of the 10th French Army. North of the 20th Corps four divisions of the 1st French Army extended to the Aisne, forming the extreme left flank of the attack.

The 20th Corps was disposed for action with the 1st United States Division on the left, the 1st Moroccan Division in the center and the 2nd United States Division on the right, each having a front of about two kilometers, while the 58th and 60th French Divisions were in reserve.

South of the 20th Corps came successively the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Divisions of the 30th Corps, three divisions of the 11th Corps, two divisions of the 2nd Corps and two divisions of the 7th Corps before the next corps containing United States troops was reached.

This was the 1st United States Corps, under command of Maj. Gen. Hunter Liggett. He had assumed command on July 4, with his own complete corps staff of American officers, and it is worthy of note that this was the first American staff organization of a unit as large as a corps which had functioned since the close of the Civil War. In his corps, at the moment, General Liggett had the 147th French Division on the left and the 26th United States Division on the right. Next in line came the 28th French Corps with the 39th French Division on the left, alongside the 26th United States, and the 3rd United States Division on the right, followed successively by four divisions of the 2nd Corps, three divisions of the 1st Colonial Corps, four divisions of the 5th Corps, three divisions of the 2nd Italian Corps, and four divisions of the 1st African Colonial Corps, which carried the line to beyond Reims.

It is noticeable that at or near the two



First and Second Divisional sectors in attack toward Soissons-Chateau-Thierry road

extremities of the initial attack the French command had placed American divisions; those on the left near the Aisne and those on the right near Château-Thierry. Between these two points the front bulged westward, especially just south of the Forêt de Villers-Cotterêts. To driving into the center of the salient, the capture of the highlands southwest of Soissons was a necessary preliminary, after which the rest of the front would naturally pivot upon these highlands in swinging northeast and north toward the Vesle.

It was to the task of capturing the greater part of the highlands that the 1st and 2nd United States Divisions, together with the 1st Moroccan, were assigned. At the same time, it was necessary that the troops at the apex of the salient should themselves for a while mark time and act as a pivot to the westward the Forêt de Villers-Cotterêts while the latter were hammering in the westward bulge of the front and straightening it out to swing northward like a gate closing on the Vesle.

This was the difficult duty given, on the right of the attack, to the 26th Division, which was later to be asked, after the straightening process should have been completed, to reverse its role and become the swinging edge of the attack, closing on the Vesle by longer strides than any of the troops to the left of it.

The work of the 3rd United States Division, east of Château-Thierry, and of the other Allied forces extending to Reims could not, of course, begin until all this attack to the westward was well under way and until the German attack itself was stopped and driven back. Then they, too, like another gate pivoting on Reims, with the 3rd United States Division at the swinging edge, might close to the Vesle.

Rifles and Enthusiasm

There were various reasons why the American divisions were given such important places along the offensive front, but among the reasons were the fact that they were large, full divisions containing approximately 25,000 men each—almost twice as many rifles as the average French division—and the further fact that they possessed enthusiasm and endurance, unassayed by four years of war, and dogged determination.

The 1st Division, commanded by Maj. Gen. Charles P. Sumner, went over the top that morning into the gray dawn of the plateau between Cntry and Missy-aux-Bois, in line from right to left, 18th Infantry and 16th Infantry, making up the 1st Brigade, under Brig. Gen. John L. Hines; 26th Infantry and 28th Infantry, making up the 2nd Brigade, under Brig. Gen. Beaumont B. Buck. In front of them, across the trenches of the German 5th, 14th, 15th and 16th Divisions, swept the barrage from the batteries of the 5th, 6th and 7th Regiments of Field Artillery, of Col. L. E. Holbrook's 1st Artillery Brigade, strengthened by a number of French batteries.

Behind the charging troops lay the deep cut ravine between the villages of St. Pierre-Aigle and Laversine, on the eastern edge of which were the trenches which they had taken over from a brigade of the Moroccan Division only the night before on entering the sector from Chavigny. Ahead of them, across the plateau, appeared, successively, the church steeples of the villages of Missy-aux-Bois, Ploisy and Berzy-le-Sec, with the trees lining the Soissons-Paris highway cutting across the open ground between the former two villages. Every division had been ordered to take, and it had been ordered to reach that day a position astride the Soissons-Paris road, involving an advance of at least five kilometers.

Two Kilometers in an Hour

They made a good beginning. By 5:30 a.m., but in a trifle less than an hour after starting, they had overrun two kilometers of the maze of trenches and wire which the Germans had been laboriously constructing on this ground during the past six weeks, and had covered nearly half the distance across the open landscape to Missy-aux-Bois. Two hours later the second objective line, running from Crevaux Farm to the eastern edge of the ravine at the head of which lies Missy-aux-Bois, had been attained, though not without a sharp struggle for the 28th and 26th Infantry in Missy-aux-Bois and the ravine.

Excepting for this struggle, the first four and one-half kilometers of the advance had been conquered very quickly and at light cost in casualties, and a large number of guns and machine guns had been taken. But now the enemy, recovered from his first surprise and largely reinforced more tenaciously. Though the 18th Infantry was able to push to and even beyond its third objective, the village of Chaudun, the 26th and 28th could not get across the Soissons-Paris road, on the plateau between the ravines of Missy-aux-Bois and Ploisy, because of the intense machine gun fire sweeping their rear from the lower reaches of the former ravine which the 153rd French Division, to the left, had been unable to cross.

From this time forward, in fact, the latter division had great difficulty in keeping abreast, owing to the fact that it was obliged to attack these deep

ravines, cutting down to the Aisne, along its whole front, while the left brigade of the 1st Division, clipping off their heads, was more or less helped along by the right brigade, which was on more level ground.

Enemy Thoroughly Alarmed

The progress of the 1st Division was, therefore, brought to an end for the day, but it had virtually accomplished its appointed task, and taken about 30 field guns, captured 700 men, and 150 man, most of them in the Missy-aux-Bois ravine, and something like 2,000 prisoners, of whom 500, including a battalion commander and several other officers, were taken at one time in a quarry by a handful of Americans.

That the enemy was thoroughly alarmed by the smashing attack which was so rapidly overrunning his vitally important positions on "the highlands" southwest of Soissons was plainly evidenced by the fact that that night he threw his XXXIVth Division into line on the front between Missy-aux-Bois and Ploisy, between the 14th Moroccan and the 11th Moroccan Divisions, and put his XXVIIIth Division into the head of the Chazelle ravine, confronting Chaudun.

At 4 o'clock on the morning of the 19th the 1st Division started ahead again for an objective line reaching from Berzy-le-Sec, on the western heights overlooking the valley of the Court River and the shaft of important railways, and roads, lying within it, southward to Buzancy, a village on the opposite side of the valley mentioned.

It was not intended that either of the villages should be captured by the 1st Division, but only the ground between them, as Berzy-le-Sec was in the sector of the 153rd French Division and Buzancy in that of the Moroccan Division. The 18th and 16th Infantry immediately jumped forward to Chazelle, halfway between Chaudun and the Soissons-Paris railway.

The 26th and 28th Infantry, galled in front by the fire from the Ploisy ravine and in the rear by that from the Missy-aux-Bois ravine, could not struggle beyond the Soissons-Paris highway, though a detachment of French tanks accompanying them waddled ahead and was shot to pieces on the edge of the Ploisy ravine.

At Right Angles to Sector

The left was now so far behind the right that the front lay almost at right angles to the divisional sector. It was necessary to rectify the alignment before any further general progress could be made, and in a savage attack at 5:30 that evening the 2nd Brigade partly accomplished it, clearing the head of the Ploisy ravine and taking a large proportion of an additional 1,000 prisoners and 20 field guns. The divisional casualties so far had been about 3,000.

Against the most desperate opposition the Americans were relentlessly approaching Berzy-le-Sec, the capture of which would mean to the Germans that the Soissons-Château-Thierry highway could no longer be used for transportation into the Marne salient from the railroad of Soissons. It would mean, in short, that the salient was lost. Knowing this only too well, the enemy during the night thrust into the line covering the village and its all-important heights still another division, the XLVth Reserve. On their part the staff of the 153rd Division was still some distance from it, directed the 1st United States to take Berzy-le-Sec at 2 o'clock next day, for which purpose the 2nd Brigade was reinforced by a battalion from the divisional reserve.

Forward to Fierce Struggle

At the appointed time, following a furious barrage of two hours by the divisional artillery, the troops went forward. There followed a struggle as ferocious and protracted as any in the annals of the American Army. Time after time throughout the afternoon and night the lines surged back and forth in attack and counter-attack, machine gun nests were taken over and over, and the opposing infantry grappled one another with bayonets and trench knives, grenades and clubbed rifles.

At length, early on the morning of the 21st, when his officers had nearly all fallen killed or wounded and when his men, exhausted but still determined, had dropped back for a brief respite, Beaumont B. Buck, the brigade commander, walking along his front beneath the hail of the enemy's fire, personally directed the formation of the line for a last supreme effort and then himself led the first wave as it rose up and rolled toward and into and over the smoking ruins of the village, engulfing there a battery of field guns, dozens of machine guns and hundreds of prisoners.

The victory was won. To the right the 1st Brigade had already overrun the Soissons-Château-Thierry road and now five kilometers away to the northward, down the valley of the Crise, the city and railroad yards of Soissons lay open to artillery fire from the heights of Berzy-le-Sec. The rest of that day and the next were spent in cleaning up the embankments and consolidating the positions. During the night of July 22 the 1st Division was relieved by the

15th Scottish Division, of the British Army, and withdrew to Dammartin, northeast of Paris, where by the 27th it was resting in cantonments.

Not a Man Captured

It had suffered 7,000 casualties, of whom not one was captured. Sixty per cent of its infantry officers had been killed or wounded, the 16th and 18th Infantry each lost all their field officers except the colonels, while the 26th Infantry was commanded by a captain of less than two years' experience. But—in addition to the German killed and wounded—it had captured 3,500 prisoners, including 125 officers; 68 field guns and quantities of machine guns, ammunition and material and it had advanced 11 kilometers in four days against the untiring efforts of parts or all of seven different German divisions, and broken the hinge of the enemy's defensive line between the Aisne and the Marne.

The part taken by the 2nd United States Division in the counter-offensive was perhaps as brief and certainly as breathless as that of any division, American or French, which participated in the memorable struggle. The circumstances of its approach march, its attack and its battle were so typically American that they savor more of Chancellorsville, Chickamauga or Spotsylvania Court House than of incidents of European warfare.

The 2nd Division, whose regimental units were the same as during its fighting around Bourlémont and the Bois de Belleau in June, but whose commander was now Maj. Gen. James G. Harbord, was relieved from its support position in the sector northwest of Château-Thierry on the night of July 16-17 and taken by motor bus to Mareilly near the western side of the Forêt de Villers-Cotterêts, the horse and motor-drawn transport going to the same vicinity by marching.

In the Forest

Shortly after arrival there on the morning of the 17th, orders were received for an attack to be delivered at 4:35 o'clock next morning on the enemy's front along the eastern edge of the forest, which latter is an immense tract of very heavy timber, 10 or 12 kilometers wide at the point where the 2nd Division was approaching it and intersected in every direction by a maze of main and woodland roads.

Confusion in directions received from various sources as to the proper road to follow resulted in the troops becoming more or less scattered through the woods and entangled with the mass of transport, American and French, which, because the forest gave concealment from airplane observation, was congested there behind the divisions going to the attack.

Extra ammunition and other supplies had to be issued to the troops; commanding officers had to receive at least hasty sketch maps and sufficient instructions to know where they were and what they were expected to do. But by the time these essential preliminaries had been attended to in even part of the division, night had fallen. With darkness a heavy rain set in, and under the forest trees the night became so black that one could not see a pace ahead and the advancing troops seemed hopelessly blocked and delayed by the endless columns of smoke and trucks of the German troops, such of them as remained, dug themselves in, and the next morning the 2nd Engineers, following the Engineers' prerogative of digging all night and fighting all day, advanced through the remnants of the 9th Infantry and the 6th Marines, through these columns of smoke, and at 7 o'clock drove forward again more than two kilometers to Tigny, where, on the edge of the Bois d'Artemes and less than a kilometer west of the Soissons-Château-Thierry highway, the depleted American units were brought to a stop, but entrenched themselves, and aided by the men of the 23rd Infantry, a battalion held every inch of their gains.

It was now evident that even the extraordinary driving power of the 2nd Division was exhausted, for it was reduced to little more than half its original strength, the 23rd Infantry, for example, having only 37 officers and 1,473 enlisted men left out of 90 officers and 3,400 enlisted men, while the troops had received no cooked food since leaving Montreuil-aux-Lions, on the night of July 16. It was relieved, accordingly, by the 55th French Division during the night of the 19th-20th, rested until noon the next day in the forest, and then marched to St. Etienne, where it bivouacked until at 7 a.m. on July 21. Swept out of the woods in the gray dawn, the 2nd Division had advanced eight kilometers in 26 hours and one of its regiments, the 23rd, alone had taken prisoner 75 officers and 2,100 men from the 14th, 15th and 16th German regiments belonging to the XLVth Reserve, the XLIIth, the XLVth and the CXVth German Divisions, besides capturing two batteries of 150mm. field guns, five batteries of 77mm., one battery of 210mm., about 100 machine guns and 15,000 rounds of 77mm. ammunition. No available information gives the prisoners and booty taken by the rest of the division, but at least 878 more prisoners were captured, and the division had contributed its full share toward giving to the Marne salient a place in Prussian history beside that of Jena.

The Second's Path

Their sector, starting in the edge of the forest between Chavigny Farm, on the right, and the Carrefour des Fourneaux, on the left, ran straight away northeast for about three kilometers over open, rolling country across Verte Feuille and Beaupre Farm. Then, swinging sharply to the right with the hill just west of Vauxcastille as pivot, and narrowing gradually to a breadth of less than two kilometers, it went east and slightly south across the ravine of Vauxcastille and that of the Bois Leonaire, north of it; the ravine and village of Verzy where, on the hill, it crossed the longest tunnel of the railway line between Soissons and Paris; and then, still traversing lengthwise a high, flat ridge of the uplands devoid of buildings but intersected by

various farm roads, it crossed the main Soissons-Château-Thierry highway between the villages of Taux and Hartennes and terminated in the Bois d'Artemes.

Although the German counter-barrage opened promptly and although, owing to their precipitous advance, the infantry had neither machine guns nor hand or rifle grenades, Major Foch's 2nd Battalion, leading the 23rd Infantry, with only rifles for weapons, was on its first objective, which included Beaupre Farm, 15 minutes after going over, and the leading battalions of the 2nd Infantry tried hard but they had already disappeared over the hill in front, in the direction of Vauxcastille. This village, on their second objective, the 2nd Battalion had, in fact, occupied at 6:45, leaving behind them on their headlong course, in the vicinity of Beaupre and elsewhere, several battalions of captured field guns and a complete hangar with large quantities of gasoline.

On Plateau Above Verzy

Swinging now to the new direction, east by south, and with the 1st Moroccan Division keeping abreast on the left as it headed for Lechelle and the ravines beyond, and the 55th French Division keeping abreast on the right toward Montreuil-aux-Lions, the 2nd Division plunged into the ravine of the Bois Leonaire and Vauxcastille, crossed its marshy woods and the embankment of the Soissons-Paris railway, after a brief but terrible struggle with German infantry and machine gunners, and by 9:30 a.m. was on the plateau overlooking Verzy.

The western extremity of this village was taken immediately thereafter with a large number of prisoners, including, it was reported, a major general, but, though surrounded on the north, west and partly on the south, the enemy continued to hold out bravely in the rest of the village and also in the unsubdued nests and dugouts of the Vauxcastille ravine, where the mopping-up troops of the support waves were encountering stubborn resistance.

The American casualties had already been severe, but now they became still more so. The batteries of the 2nd Battalion of the 15th Field Artillery came up to close action to combat the torrent of shells which the enemy's guns just east of Verzy were sending over, and little by little through the afternoon the rear waves of the infantry were fed into the front line to take the places of those who fell.

During this time of bitter and disjointed fighting it was that many men in all the regiments engaged showed extraordinary heroism in the rushing and capturing of machine gun nests, as was done by Sgt. Louis Cukela, of the 5th Marines, who, having no hand grenades of his own, captured some German ones, worked his way alone to the rear of an enemy strong point that was holding up his line, rushed it with grenades, and captured two machine guns and four men.

Saved His Captain's Life

It was in this vicinity that Cpl. J. Tickner, 9th Infantry, himself wounded, assisted his wounded captain to walk forward and direct the attack of their company until a shell took off the officer's leg and again wounded Tickner, who thereupon, nothing daunted, compelled five German prisoners to carry the captain back four kilometers to a first aid station, thus saving his life.

And it was near Verzy, too, that Sgt. Hercules Korgis, 23rd Infantry, lived up to the reputation of his given name by walking into a large dugout, extracting therefrom six German officers and 200 soldiers and marching them back, under a small escort, to the rear of the front line, obliging them to police the field of wounded men on the way.

Although the troops had been without food and almost without water all day, at about 6:30 o'clock in the evening the advance was resumed in the direction of the Bois d'Artemes, a forward effort against Verzy being included in the attack. The 9th and 23rd Infantry went forward, the latter supported by 15 French tanks and a battalion of Moroccan which had crossed the sector from the left. By 8 o'clock, against stubborn opposition, especially in the way of intense artillery and machine gun fire, the line had progressed about two kilometers, the 9th Infantry lying on the plateau south of Chantigny and the 23rd, about midway between Verzy and Tigny, but with its right curving to the southwest so as to present the whole front as a pronounced salient across the open ground, with the enemy on the east and south of it.

Engineers Go Through

Verzy had finally been captured, but all the ground traversed by the attack was covered with wounded, and no further progress could be made that night. The American troops, such of them as remained, dug themselves in, and the next morning the 2nd Engineers, following the Engineers' prerogative of digging all night and fighting all day, advanced through the remnants of the 9th Infantry and the 6th Marines, through these columns of smoke, and at 7 o'clock drove forward again more than two kilometers to Tigny, where, on the edge of the Bois d'Artemes and less than a kilometer west of the Soissons-Château-Thierry highway, the depleted American units were brought to a stop, but entrenched themselves, and aided by the men of the 23rd Infantry, a battalion held every inch of their gains.

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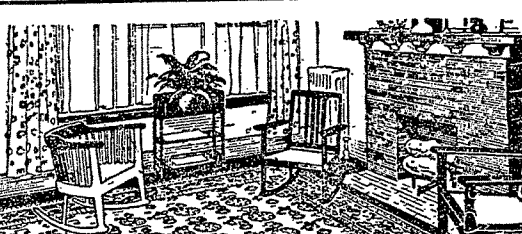
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